4911 Aurora Drive
Kensington, Maryland 20895
September 28, 1988

Mr. Al Wright
Director
Los Angeles County Office of Alcoholism Programs
~~849 South Broadway~~ 714 W. Olympic - Tenth floor
~~Suite 900~~
Los Angeles, California 90014

Dear Al:

I represent an organization called Oxford House, Inc., which has 18 houses for recovering alcoholics and drug addicts in the Washington, D.C. area. I have read about your alcohol-free living centers in Los Angeles, and believe it will be of great interest to you to hear about Oxford House.

Oxford House began in 1975 when some of us were living in a Montgomery County, Maryland halfway house just outside Washington. The county cancelled funding for the house, so we assumed the lease, named it Oxford House, and ran it ourselves without staff or financial support. We found it worked much better than the country-run house which had counselors and a lot of needless, patronizing rules. After six months we used our surplus money to start a second house in Washington.

The word quickly spread through the AA community that Oxford House was a good place to get sober, and we were overrun with applications from prospective residents. So we kept on expanding, using internally generated funds. Existing houses would pass the hat or residents and house alumni would lend the houses enough to lease a new house and we would be in business. By the end of three years we had about 10 houses.

By that time the original residents had all moved on to concentrate on their careers and families. When we moved we worried that the houses wouldn't do as well without our participation. We were delighted to find that we were wrong. We had written an Oxford House manual explaining how we felt a house ought to be run and newer residents used it.

I will include some of the stuff we have written about the organization that you can read.

In a nutshell, Oxford Houses are similar to fraternity houses. They are self-supporting and democratically-run. Until this year we never accepted even a loan from anyone outside the Oxford House family (residents and alumni). Each house elects its own president and treasurer and holds meetings to conduct its own business. There are two fundamental rules for all houses: (1) they immediately throw out anyone who drinks or uses drugs and (2) everyone has to pay his share of expenses. There is an umbrella organization, Oxford House, Inc., which has a board of

directors composed of the presidents of each house. The board issues charters to new houses. For years the umbrella corporation had no money or bank account. Now, houses pay a voluntary monthly dues of $2 per resident to maintain a small bank account.

We have never pretended to be an alcohol recovery facility. Our program is attendance at AA and NA meetings. The houses -- 14 for men and two for women -- are a safe place to live and make friends and help one another while attending meetings. As I'm sure you know, in a house were people are attending meetings and getting better and helping one another, the peer pressure to get better is very powerful. We don't have accurate figures to back it up, but we believe the relapse rate of Oxford House residents is very low. I visited one house of 13 people in April and they had not had any turnover in seven months.

Unlike some halfway houses that locate in fringe areas of cities, we lease houses in the best parts of Washington and Montgomery County. By putting two to a room in big old houses, we find we can afford to lease houses anywhere. Our houses an average 10 residents each.

By leasing rather than buying, we have great flexibility. For about $4,000 we can pay the first month's rent and a security deposit and house 10 or more people in a matter of a few weeks. We look for houses that will be on the rental market for years. Four of our houses are over 10 years old.

The residents themselves decide when they are comfortable enough in their sobriety to move. There is no time limit. The average stay is probably something like one year. Rather than set deadlines and move people out, we felt it would be better to expand our capacity.

That is our problem and our challenge. The telephones ring every day and every house now with people who really need an Oxford House. We simply don't have room for them.

Fourteen months ago Paul Molloy, who was in the first Oxford House, and I became far more active in Oxford House. On a part-time basis we have helped open eight houses in that time. It's a cookie-cutter process in Washington now. Everybody knows they work and there are hundreds of people around to tell them how.

If we had a lean office and some seed money to lend to start-up, I believe we could easily open upwards of 20 houses a year in this area. The number of people seeking residence from rehabs, the VA programs, and word-of-mouth seems limitless.

It also occurred to us that the concept would work anywhere. As a test case we opened a house in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in August last year. It has 11 people and is working well with no day-to-day contact with the Washington houses. They use the manual and figure it out themselves up there, the same way we did in 1975.

Paul Molloy worked for the Senate Commerce Committee while drunk, and worked for the House Energy and Commerce Committee for six years while sober. This summer he was talked with a congressman who asked if he could do anything to help with Oxford House.

This led to passage of an amendment to the House drug bill that requires that states set aside at least $100,000 to be used

as a revolving fund to establish self-supporting, democratically run houses where drinking and drug use are prohibited, in other words, houses exactly like Oxford House. The loans would be repaid within two years and the money used again. Each group that wanted to start a sober house could borrow up to $4,000.

Mr. Waxman of California, chairman of the House health subcommittee and the person who introduced the amendment in the House, indicated that California might set aside considerably more than $100,000.

The Senate is now considering a drug bill and anything can happen this coming week. We hope to survive the legislative process, at least I think we do.

If it happens, there will be social model transitional houses coast-to-coast. Our challenge will be to get the information out as to how they can best be started and run.

This letter is mostly for your information and because I read with great interest about the alcohol-free living centers in Los Angeles. It seems to me that people involved in social model alcohol adventures should at least be in touch.

We nearly met once. Between September 1984 and October 1986 I lived on some land I bought in Mendocino County, California and was clearing it and building a cabin. I made a visit back east in the spring of 1986 and met Thomasina Borkman. When I told her about Oxford House she said it was the purest social model she had ever heard of. So I asked her what a social model was. She suggested that one way to find out was to meet some people from California who had some exciting programs in which the alcoholic was responsible for his own recovery, but in safe, comfortable houses.

I contacted some of those people and they told me about the 11th Annual California Conference on Alcohol Problems in Clear Lake. I went to the conference and met Bob Matthews, Ken Schonlau, some of the state people from Sacramento and others. They all suggested I talk to you, but each time I tried you were busy.

I would appreciate it if you could send any facts and figures or studies about your programs.

I will include the results of a survey I did in April on Oxford House residents as part of a study for the U.S. Department of Labor. They were thinking of using Oxford House as a model for some houses for veterans who had been homeless. They have since changed personnel and don't know what to do with the study, but at least we got a survey.

Yours sincerely,

John V. O'Neill

November 6, 1988

Dear Al:

This is a post script. I mailed the letter above in late September. It was returned "forwarding order expired" a couple of weeks later. Yesterday the program for the University of California, San Diego meeting on Homelessness, Alcohol, and other Drugs arrived and I got your real address. I'm going to be on one of the response panels, whatever that may be.

The reason I write a post script is that Oxford House has successfully gotten an amendment to the Omnibus Anti-drug Act since I first wrote.

I enclose a copy of our part of the act. It mandates that each state establish a revolving fund to lend to four or more alcoholics or drug addicts for group housing that will be based on the Oxford House model: self-run, self-supporting, alcohol and drug free, with the residents establishing entrance requirements and internal house policy. The money for start-up would be repaid within two years and then used to start other houses.

Congressman Waxman, chairman of the House health subcommittee, was taken with the Oxford House concept and indicated that California might set aside considerably more than $100,000.

We hope to get several model state programs going in the East, perhaps in the District of Columbia (where we already have 15 houses), New Jersey, Ohio and Maryland.

You may have some suggestions as to how to get the program launched in California. We are gearing up now to get more written material to the states and suggestions of how to establish and administer a revolving fund.

It would be very beneficial for us to work with people in California who understand the value of and have established social model programs.

I look forward to meeting you in February in San Diego.